



Place-making, settlement and well-being: The therapeutic landscapes of recently arrived youth with refugee backgrounds [☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between place-making, well-being and settlement among recently arrived youth with refugee backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on qualitative data including photo-novellas and neighborhood drawings, we describe the ways youth negotiate connections to place in early resettlement. Within the context of broader research on health and place, we describe how recently arrived youth actively seek out places with qualities associated with restoration and recovery and through these engagements, work to create therapeutic landscapes on arrival. The findings have implications for understanding the contribution of place-making to well-being in the settlement process.

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1. Introduction

Young people who have been forced to flee their country due to persecution embody the depths of the relationship between health and place. Resettled young people with refugee backgrounds have lived much of their lives in places of danger and insecurity, often devoid of opportunities for engaging in the important and normal activities and tasks of childhood and adolescence. Place-making in spaces of persecution, flight and asylum seeking is fraught with social tension and violent conflict. Social, cultural and political connections, as well as connections to place, are intentionally and unintentionally destroyed.

Although permanent resettlement is the aspiration of many refugees who cannot return to their country of origin, this is a rare opportunity. Each year, less than one per cent of the world's Convention refugees¹ are offered resettlement in one of 18

countries participating in UNHCR's resettlement programme (UNHCR, 2002, 2008). Australia offers places to approximately 13,500 people per year, of whom about 26 per cent are between the ages of 10 and 19 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2007). For many, the process of resettlement is part of the continuation of their forced displacement, culminating in their forced re-placement in a third country. Resettlement, conceptualized as "...the activities and processes of becoming established after arrival in the country of settlement" (Valtonen, 2004, p. 70), can be traumatic in part because resettlement is not freely chosen in terms of when or where replacement occurs and often results in a diasporic scattering of families and communities across the globe. Notwithstanding the importance of investigating and understanding the traumas leading to displacement, relatively little attention has been given to the concurrent and ongoing process of forced replacement and the establishment of connections to place among refugees in these contexts. The focus on displacement has left a gap in our understanding of emplacement (Turton, 2004) – about connections to place in settlement contexts.

Likewise, little is known about the potential for place-making to promote health and well-being within the context of resettlement. This paper describes the place-making activities in the everyday life of recently arrived young people with refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne, Australia. During the early period of resettlement, these youth seek out and value places that promote healing and recovery. These places, conceptualized together as therapeutic landscapes, are critical for facilitating positive connections to place, promoting well-being and

[☆]The materials from this study can be accessed at (www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html)

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¹ The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) sets out a range of legal definitions for defining categories of persons for which it has a formal mandate – refugees, returnees, stateless and internally displaced – collectively referred to as persons of concern (UNHCR 2008). These definitions are widely contested and statistics on both numbers and categories of forcibly displaced persons are unreliable. In this paper we use the formal UNHCR definition of refugee when we use this term. However, we describe the youth in this study as having refugee backgrounds because although most have been defined as "convention refugees", some have arrived on humanitarian visas or as part of family reunions and once in Australia, few youth identify themselves as refugees.

contributing to new arrivals' becoming at home in their country of resettlement.

1.1. Forced displacement in a world of movement: refugees and place

The importance of place in the refugee experience cannot be underestimated. Edward Said (2000) describes exile as the "...unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (p. 173). There have been many approaches to understanding the relationship between refugees and place. Recently, there has been a shift away from essentialist or naturalized assumptions about people/place relationships to those that recognize the effects of globalization. Within this context, the naturalized spatial relation between people, identity and community is disrupted or deterritorialized (Malkki, 1992). The diminishing limitations of distance, resulting from modern transportation and communication technologies, have opened up new dialogues regarding people, place and identity (Massey, 1994; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Keith and Pile, 1993; Olwig and Hastrup, 1997). Previously held suppositions of a world divided into static, bounded places – each inhabited by an existing group of people with an inherent bond to their land – have since been challenged (Massey, 1995; McDowell, 1999; Ahmed, 1999). Although this deterritorialization of people and place runs the risk of diminishing the important relationship people have with particular places, the theoretical uprooting of people from place opens up new ways of understanding the importance of place in a fluid, changing and contested globalized world (Gieryn, 2000; Gustafson, 2006).

Non-essentialist understandings of identity and connection to place have challenged the commonly held assumption that *once a refugee always a refugee*. Essentialist people/place frameworks run the risk of stabilizing the identities of the displaced with the land left behind, thus trapping identity in relation to loss and longing for one's homeland (Malkki, 1992; Warner, 1994; Turton, 2004; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Such unifying identities all but erase the creative human capacity for a positive remaking of the present and the future and reinforce the marginalization of refugees as natives outside of their natural place. As Malkki (1992) argues, "...the naturalization of the links between people and place lead to a vision of displacement as pathological" (p. 34). However, adopting positions that completely denaturalize the people/place/identity relationship is equally risky in a world that continues to distribute rights and social membership along territorial boundaries. Involuntary displacement marks a very real loss of social, economic and political standing that is not easily re-established (Kibreab, 1999).

Important for understanding the relationship of people who become refugees and place is a position somewhere in-between: one that recognizes the strong sense of connection to places left behind and their associated traumas while at the same time recognizing the possibilities of constructive (re)building of connections to place within a context of resettlement. Brun (2001) describes this process as 'reterritorialization', or "...the way in which displaced people and local people establish new, or rather expand networks and cultural practices that define new spaces for daily life" (p. 23). She argues that reterritorialization is a useful way of understanding the complex spatial strategies that refugees develop for negotiating places in which they are physically present, while also negotiating ongoing social, economic and emotional relationships with places from which they are physically absent (Brun, 2001). The concept of reterritorialization thus provides a useful lens through which we might better understand the ways in which the meanings of places and people's relation-

ships to these places are important for promoting well-being in a resettlement context.

1.2. The role of place in processes of healing and recovery

The importance of the relationship of place to health has been well documented, in relation to geographical inequalities of health (Frumkin, 2003; Macintyre et al., 2002), lay perspectives of health and well-being in places of everyday life (Popay et al., 1998; Bennett et al., 1999) and in the qualities of place that promote healing and restoration (Cooper Marcus and Barnes, 1999). There is now a solid body of evidence within public health (Duncan et al., 1993), social epidemiology (Kaplan, 1996) and medical sociology (Macintyre et al., 1993) that place matters when it comes to health and well-being. Place matters both in relation to empirical, physical attributes as well as lived experiences, emotional ties and meanings and this evidence has been important for informing place-based health promotion interventions (Macintyre et al., 2002). The relationship between place, health and well-being, and refugee resettlement has been explored in several ways. Place-making in the resettlement context has explored place-attachment (Bogaç, 2009); the importance of religion in overcoming feelings of alienation in places of resettlement (McMichael, 2002; Shoeb et al., 2007); the ways in which the gendering of place relates to feeling at home (Moghissi, 1999; Dyck and Dossa, 2007); the impact of concentrations of new arrivals on settlement processes and local neighborhoods (Dunn, 1993; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Wood, 1997); how mobility in places of resettlement impacts on mental health and well-being (Warfa et al., 2006); and the ways in which the challenges of place-making and resettlement become embodied and expressed through illness narratives (Gronseth, 2001; Lawrence, 2008).

Especially relevant for resettlement are investigations into the qualities of places considered to be actively health enhancing or beneficial in processes of healing and restoration (Cooper Marcus and Barnes, 1999; Williams, 2002). Such therapeutic landscapes include ancient sites renowned for improving health, including mineral spas and baths (Gesler, 1991, 1998) and sacred sites and pilgrim destinations (Gesler, 1996, 1998). The restorative qualities of these places are of interest both for their curative powers for physical ill health and healing of spiritual unrest. The relationship between the natural environment and human restoration is well documented (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Korpela and Ylen, 2007) and places that provide contact with nature are especially health enhancing (Kearns and Collins, 2000; Palka, 1999; Ulrich, 1999). Finally, the restorative qualities of everyday places such as homes in processes of healing and recovery after illness (English et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2005), as well as the restorative aspects of favourite places in everyday life (Kaplan et al., 1993; Korpela et al., 2008), highlight the power of place in supporting health and well-being.

What lessons can we learn from this broad overview of research into health and place that can be applied to refugees within resettlement contexts and to young people with refugee backgrounds in particular? It is clear that place matters when it comes to restoring health and promoting well-being and for those who have been forcibly and violently uprooted from place, the restorative powers of place and place-making are not to be underestimated. For refugees, the concept of therapeutic landscapes has particular saliency. Originally defined by Gesler (1996) as places where "physical and built environments, social conditions and human perceptions combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing" (p. 96), therapeutic landscapes would appear to be particularly important for restoring health and

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